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Matter

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Previous spread:
Dah Djagba at the front of his house
describing *Dido's* spring from bas-
reliefs. *Didonu*, Abomey, 14 Jan 2015

This conversation is based on
research work carried out in
Abomey, Benin, between January
2014 and June 2018 by Quentin
Nicolai. His thanks go to the
Legonou family, to the late Dah
Djagba, who left us in February
2016, and to all the people who,
in one way or another, enabled
to further his research. He would
particularly like to thank Constant
Legonou, without whom this work
would not have been possible.

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Courtyard of Bah Nondichao's house from the gate. *Zongo* neighbourhood, Abomey, 10 Jan 2015



Sacred Forests and Courtyards in South Benin

CONVERSATION WITH QUENTIN NICOLAI



¹ On this subject, see Grey Gundaker, 'Design on the World: Blackness and the Exclusion of Sub-Saharan Africa from "Global" History of Garden and Landscape Design', in *Cultural Landscape Heritage in Sub-Saharan Africa*, John Beardsley ed. (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2016), pp. 15–60.

QUENTIN

Africa is quite systematically absent from the debate on the landscape issue. My work is moved by the intention to approach what this notion refers to in Africa by and for Africans themselves, i.e. without imposing a Western definition of landscape on them.

ACCATTONE

You mean there is no existing research on this subject?

In itself, the landscape issue is not new in Africa. It has been present since the first contacts with Europeans on the coasts in the fifteenth century—contacts which, as no one can ignore, have contributed substantially to the construction of European nation states. The essentially commercial exchanges between the Europeans and the countries of the Slave Coast provided a framework within which new modes of representation emerged during the Renaissance, which enabled the states to consolidate themselves all the while concealing or disqualifying the African countries they were in contact with. The representations of the European nations enabled them to legitimize the slave trade and colonization, and were later picked up by many African successors since the wave of independence. During my research I realized that these representations that defined the landscape as an artistic representation, which until recently dominated landscape theory, obscured and still obscure exchanges on the African coasts, and have also contributed to concealing or excluding the modes of organization of African countries and their own landscapes.¹ I focused on Southern Benin following my discovery of the sacred forests through the work of French historian Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton. She became interested in these forests in the context of her research on the vegetal landscapes of the Slave Coast from the seventeenth century to the eve of colonization. She researched the origin of these vegetal landscapes, and in

particular the sacred forests. What can we learn about them from the writings of European travellers who have resided on the coast since the seventeenth century? This research led her to present these forests, not as relics of an older forest – a theory that had been commonly accepted since the colonial period – but as both biological and cultural creations.² This description makes up my starting point. But to allow this recognition in all its implications, it was necessary to be able to free oneself, in a ‘methodical’ manner, from the influence of the definition of the landscape as a scene. How can we describe these forests, recognize their role and place without reducing them to elements among others within a ‘picture’?

To this end I relied on the important work of American geographer Kenneth Olwig, who showed that, before being used to designate an artistic representation, the term ‘landscape’ referred to a political organization, which reflected a place and a community, i.e. a country, with its own laws, habits and customs.³ Olwig shows that later, in the Renaissance, there would have been a profound centralization in Europe (contemporary to the discovery of Africa), and these landscapes would then have become territories ruled by the king, less independent; in short, administrative provinces. This process was also part of European cartographic practice in the sixteenth century: to be a state, the boundaries of the map had to be clear. That was something new. Mapping was then part of the same process by which these landscapes were subsumed to the State. The same surveying techniques as those used for the maps were also used to produce these ‘pictures’. It is therefore the same type of space as on the map: it is the panoramic idea of the landscape that emerged during the Renaissance.

The revelation of this older meaning of the term ‘landscape’, as a political organization, leads to an interest in organizational principles: in short, in the particular ways of bringing a country, or even a nation, into existence. Starting out from the confrontation of this definition of landscape with African countries, in particular Southern Benin, I am seeking to learn to recognize gestures of concealment and disqualification that characterize this definition, and at the same time, to describe landscapes by and for Africans themselves.

So what was your approach?

I arrived in Benin through the question of sacred forests which are, as far as I knew, small forests that shelter *vodun*, which I became interested in during my research. *Vodun* are often described as deities, but I prefer to

speak of powers. There are many of them: in each family, ancestors can be recognized as *vodun* and many events are interpreted as the manifestation of a *vodun*. Some *vodun* have gained in importance over time and in the country, and are now respected in many houses and neighbourhoods. As such, some of them play an important role in spatial organization, as is the case in Abomey, the city on which I focused my research. So the *vodun* is not just a religion, as it is often presented, but a plurality of organizing powers that cross what we call the political, the social, the economic and of course the religious. Moreover, the sacred must be described differently than in opposition to the profane.

What is their connection to the forests?

Some *vodun* live in forests. In Fongbe⁴ these forests are called *vodunzun*, literally ‘*vodun* bushes’. These are places slightly away from houses where, at least once a year, ceremonies are held to maintain their powers. The sacred forests are recognizable by the nature of the *vodun* that they shelter and that they express through their composition. They must be maintained to preserve the land. A land can gain in power if it succeeds in enforcing its prohibitions and assimilating the powers of others.

Is their place of sacralization always a forest?

Some *vodun* live in forests, others at home, others still in temples: it depends on the singular trajectories of each *vodun*. A *vodun* is a power whose properties must be actualized in a particular being or place to exist in the concrete world and thus be able to propagate its effects. The most common manifestations of *vodun* are termite mounds, trees, the earth, rain, thunder, iron, etc., but they can also manifest themselves by possessing human beings. You then talk of the ‘*vodun* that climbs onto the head’. A *vodun* is recognized by its properties: language, patterns, movements, rhythms, prohibitions, matter, colours, environment, etc. An event, whether material, physical or phenomenal, must be interpreted to know the power that generates it. Hence the importance of divination. The interpretation can’t simply be improvised, and neither can everyone perform it.

The *vodun* is somehow abstract, but it is what’s most real: it is recognized in a multitude of things, beings and phenomena encountered. Matter itself is too unstable, too precarious: for this or that reason, the decision can be taken at any time to cut down a sacred forest to set up a market, build a school or a church, as happened

² Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton ed., *Forêts sacrées et sanctuaires boisés. Des créations culturelles et biologiques* (Burkina Faso, Togo, Bénin) (Paris: Karthala, 2010).

³ Kenneth Olwig, *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic: From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). It is important to note that Olwig understood the existence of this old meaning while he lived and taught in Scandinavia, where the word *landskap* is still used today to designate a place; a meaning that is very close to the meaning of the English word ‘land’ or ‘country’. The new meaning of the word *landskap* that appeared in the Renaissance, which designated the lands as administrative provinces, was then transferred to English and gave the word ‘landscape’. The difference between ‘landscape’ and ‘land’ comes from there. The same difference is also found in French with the words *pays* and *paysage*. Consequently, the transfer of the old meaning of the word *landskap* to English and French offers new possibilities to recognize lands or landscapes that have been assimilated, and draws attention to situations hitherto concealed, as in Africa.

⁴ Fongbe is the language of the former kingdom of Danxome. It is now recognized as the main *lingua franca* in Southern Benin.

during the colonial period and still happens today; but the *vodun* does not disappear for that reason, it can be relocated somewhere else, in another place, for instance by simply building a temple right next door. Its power will not decrease if its prohibitions are respected. This dynamism and malleability of the *vodun* can be disturbing for an architect trained to think in terms of structure, morphology, permanence, composition, etc. Here we have something much less heavy and fixed, more fluid, dynamic, but also hierarchical, because not all *vodun* have the same power.

Basically, you became interested in the landscape through this condition of material precarity and the organizing power of the *vodun*, as opposed to the Western visual approach.

Yes, I gradually learned to recognize the powers and their particular ways of organizing the land, including those at work in scenic approaches to landscape. In this sense, a territory is no longer defined primarily by its physical, mappable boundaries, but by the powers that possess it.

This approach did not emerge spontaneously. When I started my research, I was first interested in a particular forest, 'discovered' by scientists in the early 2000s and which in 2010 was the subject of a participatory management plan by a Beninese NGO with the aim of turning it into a community nature reserve. This forest, particularly rich in Southern Benin, grows along a river, which is itself a *vodun*, named *Hlan*. *Hlanzun* expresses the power of the river. I was interested in the situation generated by the encounter between different relations to the forest. For example, I was interested in how scientists, through biodiversity and socio-economic surveys, establish forests as nature reserves. In their new plan, the *vodun* cults appear to be unable of maintaining the forest, and so measures are put forward to isolate and demarcate the forest from them. Although this 'naturalist' approach is considered objective, free of cultural bias and subjective points of view, I realized that it adopted the same definition of landscape as historical and anthropological approaches, as they are shaped by the same materialist mode of existence. I gradually understood this through architectural drawings: they gave me the possibility, in their making, of questioning other modes of existence of the forest. My aim was to describe this forest in terms other than a confrontation between modern and traditional practices, which are not very fertile to think about the future of these places and the communities that are attached to them. I had to develop an approach that recognized

organizational modes beyond these divisions, recognizing the powers that work on them.

THE COURTYARDS

But before approaching the forest, you took a detour by the courtyards of the houses in Abomey. Why?

When I arrived in Cotonou, Benin, I first sought to meet with scientists and NGO leaders who had been involved in this forest. Through our conversations I realized that to be able to progress in my research, going directly to the site, without prior knowledge, was not the best option. So I moved into Constant Legonou's house in Abomey, with whom I had been put in touch. Constant is a research assistant who has been working with researchers around Abomey for more than 30 years. On the first day, not knowing exactly how to start, I proposed to draw the courtyard of his family home. I thought that this work would allow me to familiarize myself with the Fon language and the plants of Southern Benin, with a view to approach *Hlanzun* later on.



Discussion around the drawing of a courtyard in Abomey, 18 Jan 2017

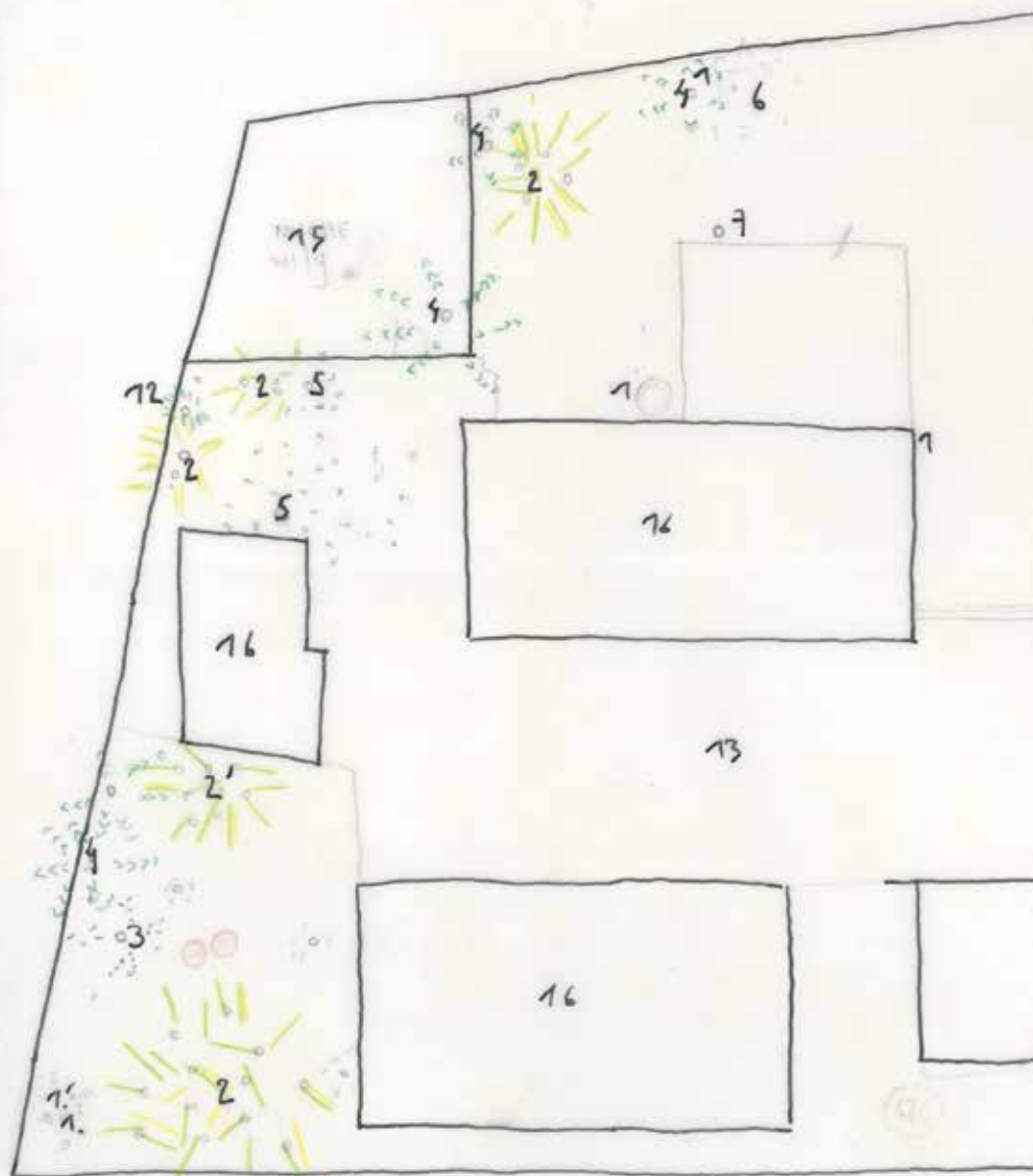
This first experience proved to be promising and later led me to visit different courtyards in Abomey, where my drawing-based 'method' was gradually consolidated. These encounters with drawing, both as a tool for description and as a support for discussion, enabled me to describe different modes of organization, both by questioning the plants and the configuration of the courtyard itself. I can show you some of these drawings ... [he shows a pile of tracings]. As it progressed, I realized that this work in the courtyards was not only an introductory work: from the houses we can learn something about the sacred forests.

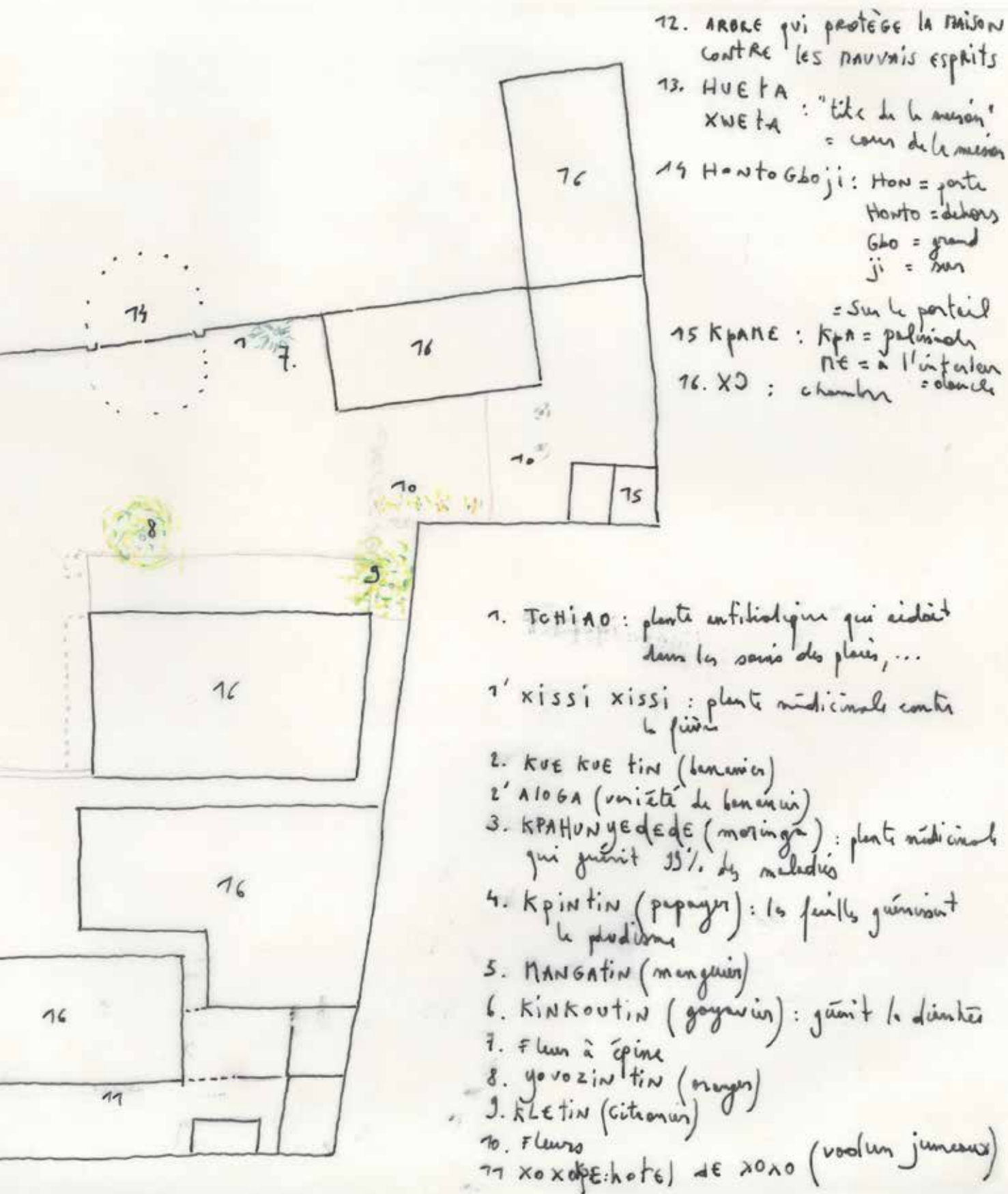
Next spread:
Courtyard of Aristide Legonou's house (Constant's father).
Lego neighborhood, Abomey,
9 Jan, 20 Aug 2015, 4 Jul 2016.

pp. 68–69:
Courtyard of Dassouvo's house.
Lego neighborhood, Abomey,
12 Jan, 21 Aug 2015, 25 Sep 2017.



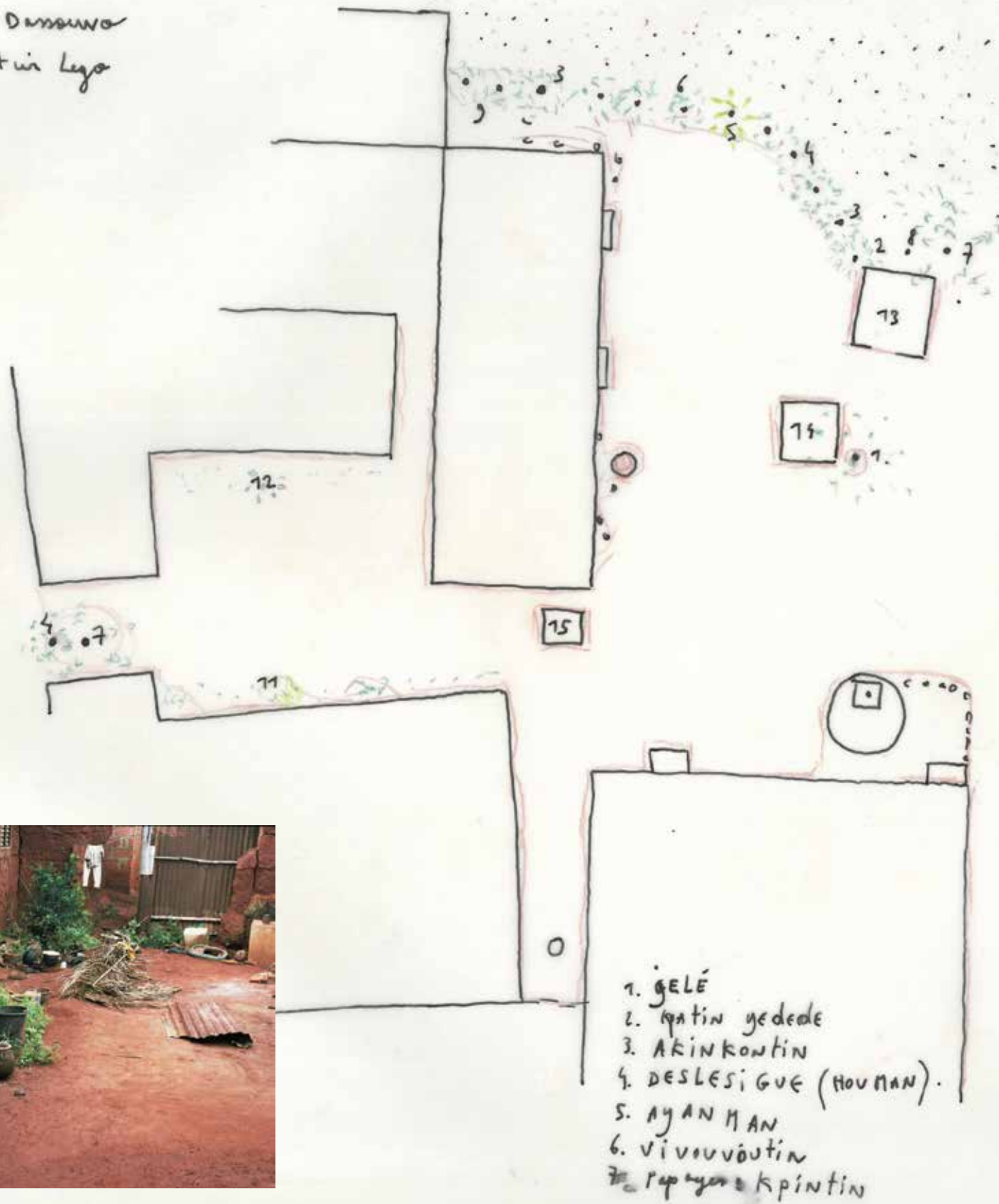
Situation Actuelle
03.07.75
chez Aristide Legrand

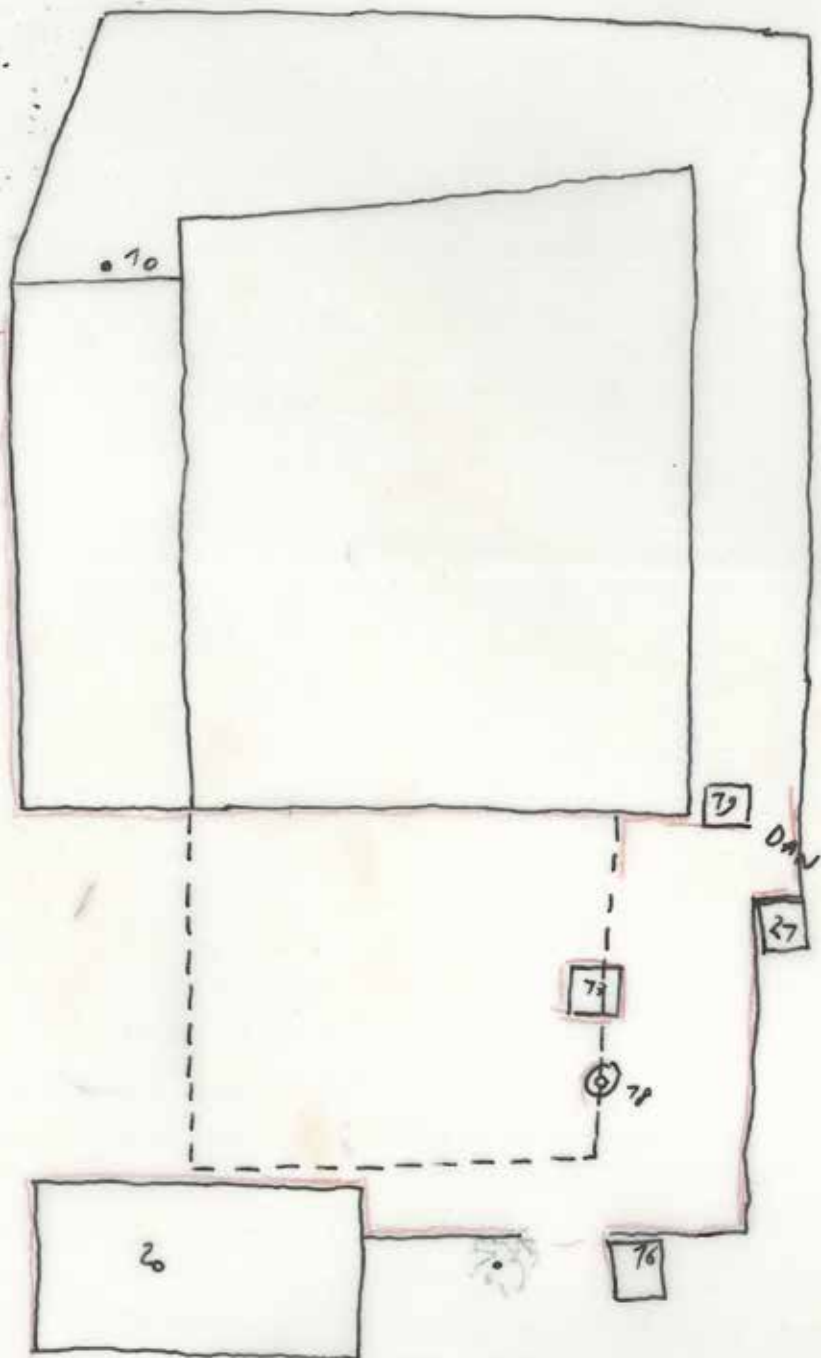




12.01.75

chez Danawa
quartier Lya





8. fleur jaunes, fleur d'agave importée
 9. DOBO LIBA
 10. orange m, mort
 11. Godo
 12. ZOMAN (20 = pen)
 13. ASEN
 14. HOXO
 15. MINONAN
 16. LEGBA
 17. LISSA
 18. GOS
 19. DAN
 20. SAKPATA
 27 DAN



This is Constant's house, where I lived. First I drew the hard elements, in ink, like the perimeters of the walls and the cemented terraces; then the plants, evoking their foliage. This was also how we proceeded for the other courtyards: I drew, then with Constant and the people who were receiving us, we would move from one plant to another, citing their names and main uses. In this house, for example, there are plants used to prepare sauces, plants against fever, coughing, sexual impotence, eye trouble, plants to chase snakes away, etc. In Benin, it is said that plants 'work'.⁵ I also became aware of the presence of many imported flowers, which intrigued me: they disrupted my idea of the landscape in Benin, and in particular my image of sacred forests at the time.

Because it evokes pleasure gardens linked to colonization?

Yes, to me, their appearance brought to mind modern European gardens: these plants are often put in visible places, in the entrances, in the form of flowerbeds and alignments. The house Constant lives in, built by his father, Aristide Legonou, evokes the image of modern property: it is a plot protected by a large metal gate, demarcated by a fence of a certain height, decorated with imported flowers and plants. Disconcerted by these presences, I became more attentive to the particular historical trajectories of the houses. At the front of the house, there is a space called *honto*, in Fongbe, literally 'on the edge of the gate' which, as Constant taught me, is still part of the house. Also giving out onto this outdoor space is the gate of the Agossou-Legonou family house, where Constant's father was born and lived before building his own house. It brings together several courtyards, each inhabited by one or more families. The concept of house in Benin, as I've come to understand it, differs in several respects from the Western concept according to which the house is defined by marked boundaries that distinguish it from the outdoor space, considered a public space as opposed to the private space of the house. In Benin, the concept of house is, I would say, more elastic: a house (*xwe*) often gathers several families; a house will refer to a set of rooms⁶ and courtyards, but also to all the family members who are under the authority of one and the same *Dah*, the head of the house. All the people who live in the house are his 'children'. A child who wants to become independent and build a house elsewhere will have to respect certain ceremonies, otherwise his or her independence will not be recognized. For instance, the head of the house must give them the *kpatin*, literally 'the tree to make the fence', to plant it on their land and set up their future house. In any case, they will always

be part of the family home, even if they live several kilometres away. They will have to come back at least once a year to feed the ancestors. This is also theoretically true for family members who live abroad, although this has become complicated in practical terms.

You mentioned the blurred boundaries of the houses, which do not follow modern land-use principles. Aren't all houses demarcated by walls?

In the past, family houses were sometimes surrounded by earthen walls: this had to be authorized by the king because such an investment demonstrated an important position. More commonly, houses were surrounded by a fence made of palm branches. They can still be found today, when they have not been replaced by breeze-block walls.



Sweeping in Agossou-Legonou house, 4 Mar 2017

These fences are made up in part of plants that protect the house from the outside world, where all kinds of things circulate. This contrast between an inhabited interior and an appropriable exterior is regularly found in Southern Benin, including in modern houses. One practice that is very important in this respect is that of sweeping: every day, the inhabitants get up around 6:30 am and sweep the courtyard, even if it looks clean. There has to be a change. By removing the marks on the ground, the day can start afresh. As night is a time when the shadows circulate, it is necessary to sweep to evacuate the tracks. During the sessions I attended in the Agossou-Legonou family home, we used to start in the house, each from a courtyard, and then go out together to sweep the front (*honto*) and in front of the various *vodun* temples in the neighbourhood. These sweeping sessions enabled me to better understand the concept of house and how different powers are articulated in and by it. It is very important to sweep the house daily to show that it is inhabited. Sweeping means establishing a contrast with what is not, the bush. The bush has no recognizable shape, it results from an entanglement, or rather it is recognizable by its entangled

5

Plants are used in all kinds of work: medicinal, *vodun*-related, for beneficial or malevolent purposes, and, lastly, against occult forces. French photographer and ethnologist Pierre Verger has compiled an inventory of plants and their work in Benin and Nigeria: *Ewé: le verbe et le pouvoir des plantes chez les Yorùbá* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997). Bah Nondichao, whose house we can see on page 62, has been Pierre Verger's assistant in Abomey towards the end of the 1950s.



6

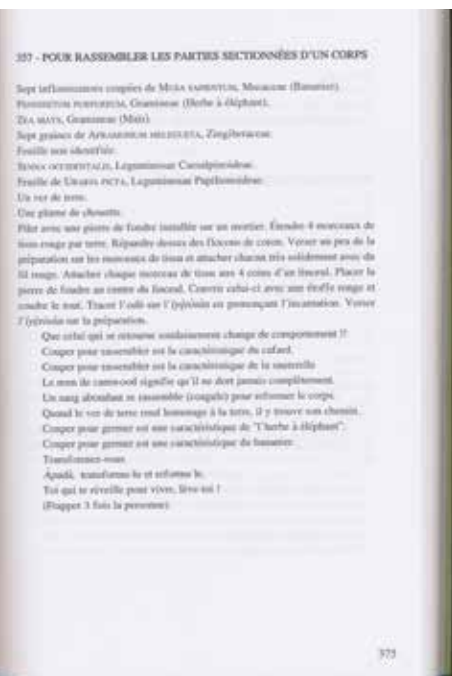
In Southern Benin, the word 'room', a literal translation of *xo* in Fongbe, refers to a small dwelling, usually with one or two bedrooms and a living room. This word is also used to designate the *vodun*'s temples.

7
Marilyn Strathern, *Learning to See in Melanesia: Four Lectures Fiven in the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, 1993–2008* (Manchester: HAU Books, 2013).

shapes. It is a privileged place of residence for the spirits who hide and circulate there.

You transferred the swept areas to your tracings. Did you make all these plans intuitively?

I often first created the structure of the drawing in a black A3-sized notebook, and then I would add a tracing sheet to draw plants, objects, tracks. It was the idea of being able to superimpose different versions. The earth-coloured lines mark the swept areas. For the plot, sometimes we took measurements with a stick or with steps to get an idea of the proportions, otherwise I would just estimate the dimensions: I would walk around the courtyard for a while and then I would start drawing. It was very important for me to take seriously what was shown to us and what was not. There are some areas we didn't have access to, and others we were invited into. English anthropologist Marilyn Strathern draws attention to the 'effects of revelation and concealment'.⁷ The drawing offers a trace to reflect this. By describing them, I make these courtyards exist in a certain way: I evoke them more than I represent them. Drawing is partial, it brings out an aspect of these places, which are in themselves inexhaustible. It is by first recognizing this that we can learn something about landscapes that are not organized through visual representation.



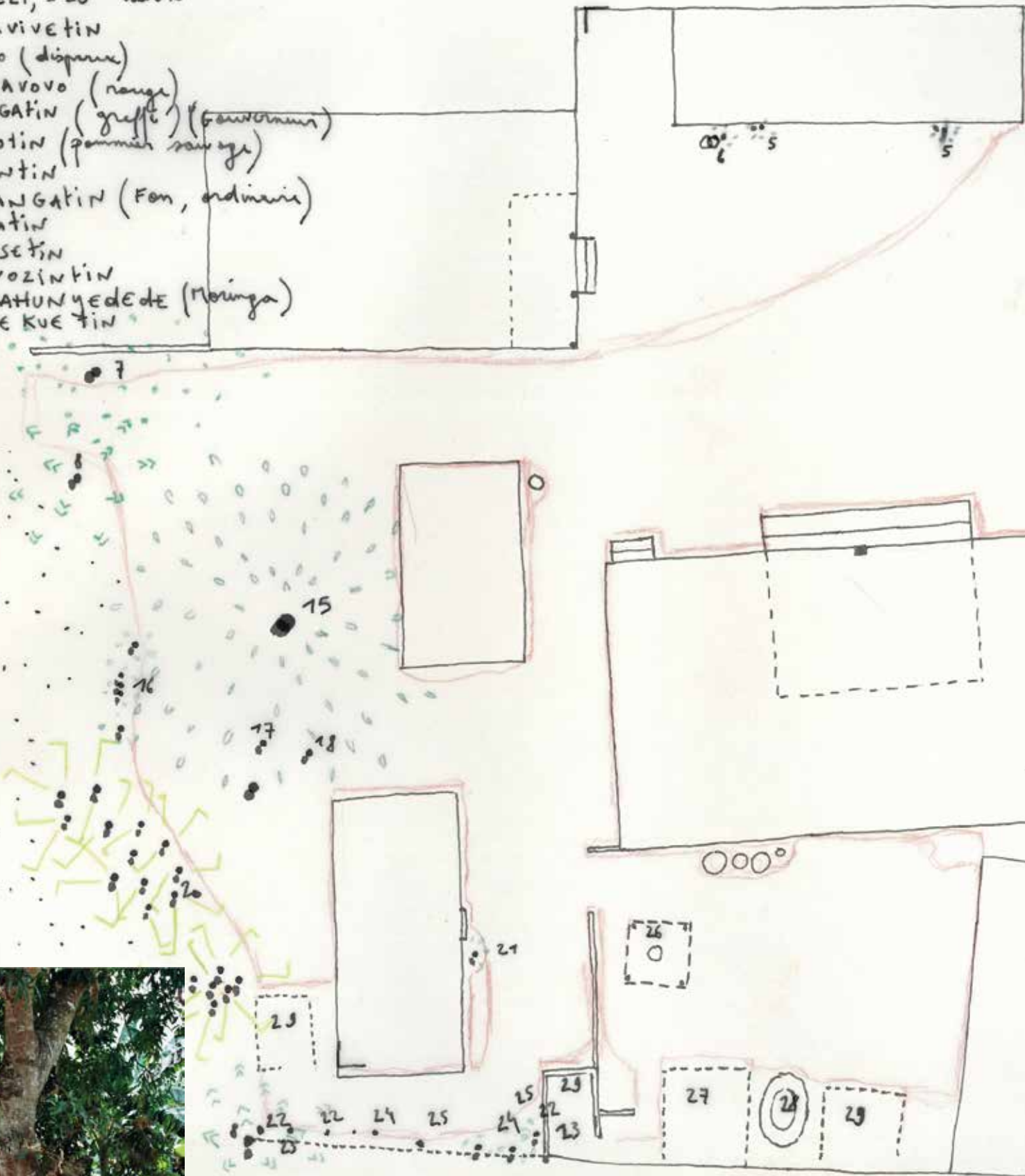
In this picture (26 May 2018) I am facing the front (*honto*) of the Agossou-Legonou house, where I lived. In the foreground is their temple with the vodun *tòhosu*. We could talk about it for hours because it is such a dense subject. Without going into details here, it is a vodun related to children born with abnormalities, defects, teeth, hair, etc. The particularity of this cult is that it can be found on different scales: in houses, in the neighbourhood, in the country. As I said earlier, some vodun have generated principles that could be described as urbanistic. This cult was established under King Tegbesu in the eighteenth century to manage disorder in the kingdom and, in the end, to reconfigure it. After him, each of the kings had a temple installed for his *tòhosu*, around which a neighbourhood was organized. In *Lego*, it is Zomadonu who is the first of these *tòhosu*. He is still recognized today as the country's most powerful vodun. Legonou's family has acquired an important position related to this vodun, along with two other families: they have been entrusted with tasks, such as calling prayers; the fact that they possess their own *tòhosu* temple is a sign of this status. The *tòhosu* draws its power from its capacity to concern everyone: kings, important families or assimilated foreign families. It makes it possible to balance and organize a population that is constantly changing as a result of war and migrations.

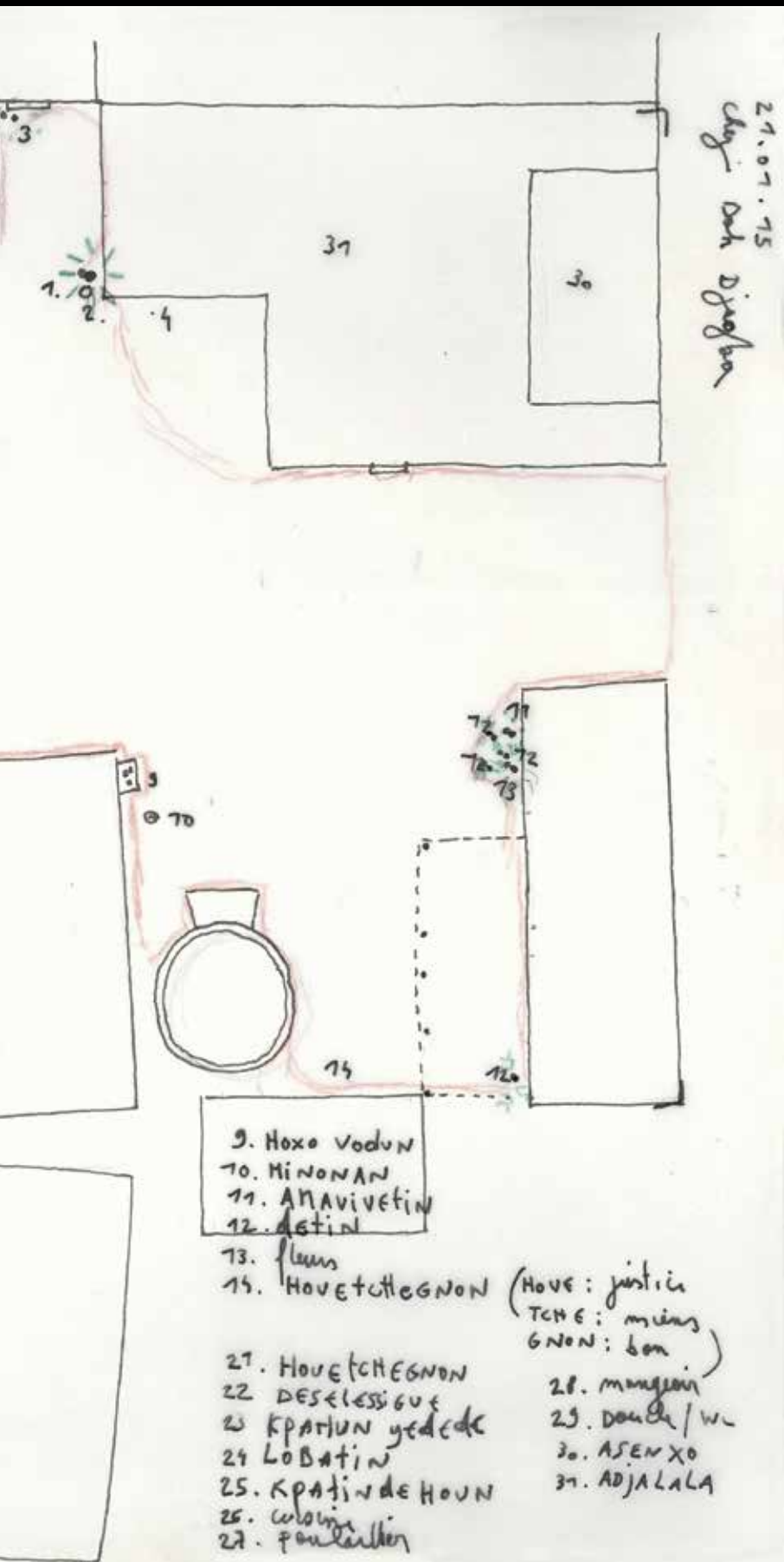


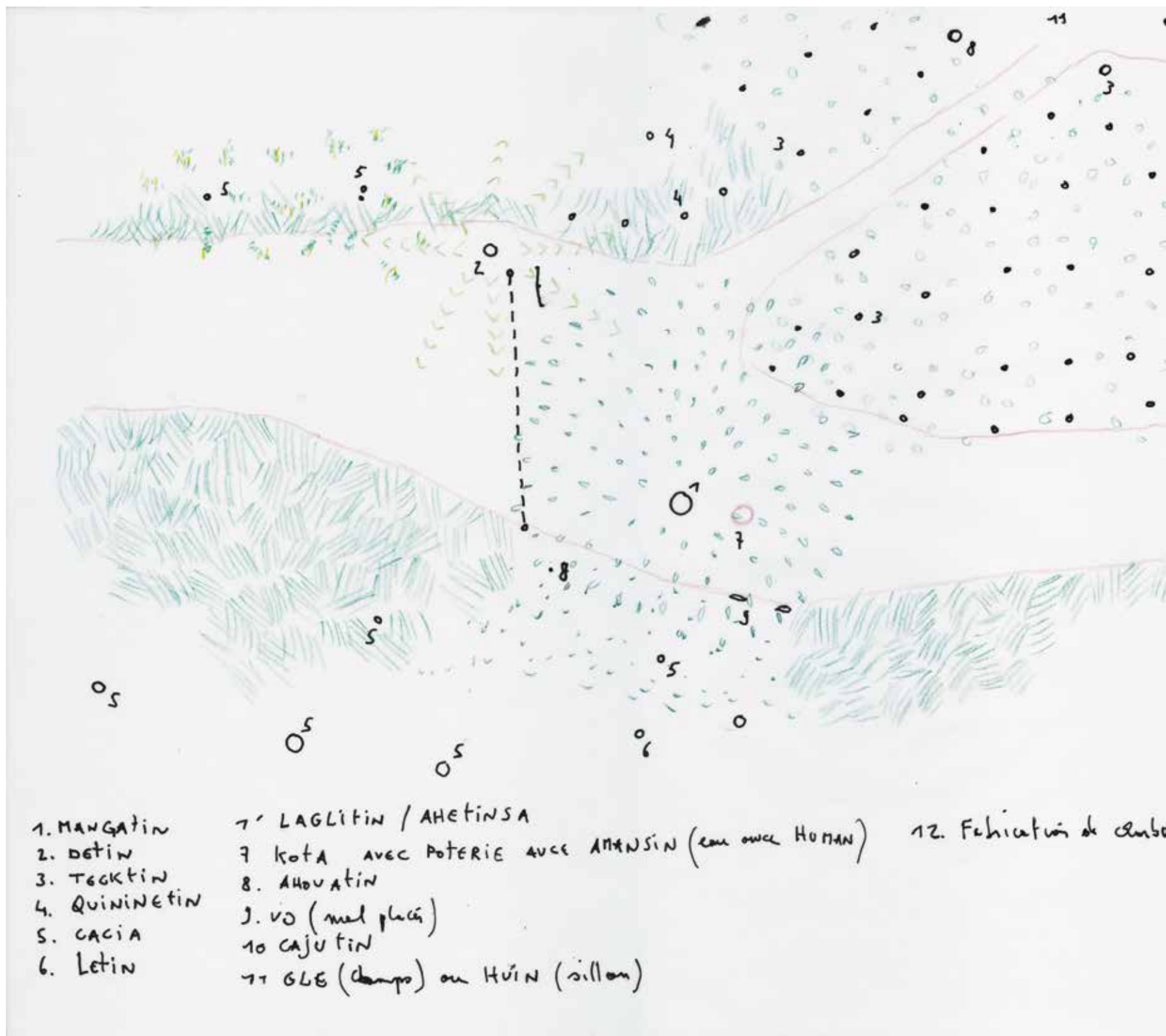
This picture was taken only a few days later, on 31 May 2018. It demonstrates the dynamics of the place. I learned that a woman in the family had died; she lived in Cotonou. For the funerals her body had to return to the house. For that, the family prepared for her arrival and repainted the entire front in white. Appearances are not random, they 'work', they are active. Indeed, white has a purifying effect; everything that must be worn or carried that has an appeal to the sacred is generally protected in a white fabric: some *tòhosu* followers are, for example, dressed all in white; even the tree in the front has been painted white.

Next page:
Courtyard of Djagba family's house.
Didonu, Abomey, 21 Jan 2015

1. DESELISSIGUE (HUMAN)
2. XWELI, - LU vodun
3. AMAVIVETIN
4. GODO (dispute)
5. SOMAVOVO (range)
6. MANGATIN (griffe) (pauvrement)
7. ASROTIN (pauvrement sauvage)
8. KPINTIN
15. MANGATIN (Fon, ordinaire)
16. KPATIN
17. LISSETIN
18. YOVOZINTIN
13. KPAHUNYEDETE (Moringa)
20. KUE KUE TIN







The tree where followers stop to purify during ceremonies, with the sign from the Tourist Office. *Didozunme*, Abomey, 23 Aug 2015

THE FORESTS

During these initial encounters with the houses, I was interested in what they could teach me about forests. I had talked about it with Constant as soon as I arrived in 2015. An opportunity to link this work to a forest soon presented itself. He introduced me to a friend of his, Dah Djagba, the head of the *Dido* spring: the forest has grown and been arranged around it. Without the water from this spring, it is impossible to hold the ceremonies for the royal *tohosu*. Dah Djagba offered to take us there.

Isn't it a natural forest?

In sacred forests, it is very difficult to tell the spontaneous part from the planted part. This forest being around a spring, it is very likely that it grew spontaneously, but you will see that it has been modified, enriched over time, and configured in such a way as to define a particular mode of access to the spring.

We thought these forests were sacred because they were natural, virgin.

I gradually discovered that these forests are like houses. They are in fact often referred to as *vodunxwe*, literally 'vodun house', and



The barrier and sign from the Tourist Office, 23 Aug 2015



inside there are paths and clearings that are scrupulously maintained, like the courtyards of the houses, even outside ceremonies. It is necessary to keep these places habitable for the *vodun*. The bush can be a source of danger, but it is also what gives these places their strength. The *vodun* gains its power from its connection to the changing external forces to be found in the bush.

We are here at the entrance of the Djagba house (pp. 72–73). When he showed us these bas-reliefs, Dah Jagba explained to us that his family was appointed by King Huegbadja, recognized as the founder of the kingdom of Danxome in the mid-seventeenth century, to take care of the spring. Before him, it is said that it was owned by a local chief who asked for a payment to access it. The control of the springs was a crucial issue. To make it accessible, the king had this person killed. He installed the family and gave it the name *Djagba*, which means ‘free’: from then on, the spring would be free. Since then, this family



The mango tree where the uninitiated stop during the ceremony *toyiyi*, 28 Jan 2017



has been responsible for managing the spring. We enter the forest, Dah Djagba stops and warns me: it is under this mango tree (*Mangifera indica*) that the uninitiated must stop during the ceremonies. The mango tree is a plant imported from South America. It is often planted in houses for shade. It is therefore not surprising that this tree was used to mark this location. The initiated continue, while the others stop at the mango tree and wait for their return, sometimes for more than three hours. In the time that the followers go to fetch the water, a small market emerges: coolers are filled with drinks, meat is roasted, people drink, eat, talk and sing.

If you continue along the path, you come to a sign from the Tourist Office. At this point, the

path is blocked. Tourists can go that far when there are no ceremonies. The plaque shows that from there on you have to take off your shoes, that taking photos is not allowed and neither is entering the temples: you are in a sacred place. By recalling the prohibitions, this plaque indicates the power of the *vodun*. The sacred is no laughing matter. ‘If they catch you, it’s very serious’, Dah Jagba warns me again.



Mango tree where the followers first stop to purify, 14th Jan 2015

This is another tree, at the foot of which a piece of pottery has been placed with water in which certain leaves have been mixed. They make it possible to purify the followers who would be considered impure, i.e. those women who have their period or who would have slept with a man the day before. Those who persist would be undermining the *vodun* and risk death.



Dah Djagba (centre) under the *vun vuitin*. Behind him stands *Dido's legba*, 14 Jan 2015

1. vivoutin
2. TECK
3. NEEM - QUININETIN
4. ACADJUTIN
- 5.
6. LEGBA DE DIDO. LG 29.10.2007

1. GLACEMAN
2. HUMAN
3. DADA GLELE Hôhâ le 13.06.2010
4. VODOUN DIDO. VODOUN SEGBOLISSA KPATANKPO le 13.
5. DAN (Dragon)



Room of the vodun Dido, 23 Aug 2015



Dido's legba, 14 Jan 2015

Continuing along the path we come to a *vun vuitin* tree (*Ficus* family), which can be found in front of many houses and temples in Abomey. The *vun vuitin* is a shade tree, like the mango tree, but it is rarely found in houses. Dah Djagba stands beneath it and the followers arrive in line with the pieces of pottery on their heads to take water from the spring. A few steps behind is the *legba*, which is a widespread *vodun* and which is also found in front of houses and temples (see for example Dassouvo's house, p. 73), although

today its presence at the gate is less common. After passing the *legba* and following a narrow, curving path, we arrive at the room of the *vodun Dido*, in the centre of a clearing. In front of it, we can see the *desresige* (*Newbouldia laevis*), a tree used as a *kpatin*, to make the fence of the house, and often found near temples because its leaves are necessary for *vodun* ceremonies. Prayers to the *vodun* are made with a bottle of royal gin that Dah Djagba had asked me to bring. He sprinkled the *vodun* with water from the spring, and asked him for *fifa*, literally 'peace' and 'freshness'. The *vodun* itself is manifested by a termite mound. As I said, the *vodun* is in itself a being with a blurred presence, but who can be recognized by

Termite mounds in *Dido's* bush and in the field next to Dah Djagba's house, *Didonu*, Abomey, 20 Jan 2015



material, physical, phenomenal manifestations. One and the same *vodun* can be in several places at the same time, or in the same place intermittently. Here, the *vodun Dido* is both the spring and the termite mound, and it can also take possession of a *vodunsi*, literally 'wife of the vodun', a male or female follower.



Acces to the spring, 14 Jan 2015

Dah Djagba allowed me to go to the spring on a second visit. He asked me not to take pictures of the spring itself, but I was allowed to draw the layout of this part of the forest.

We pass the spring, and we continue on the path. Dah Djagba stops in front of small

termite mounds that are said to have been produced by spirits to shelter there. These bush spirits are called *aziza*. It is said in Abomey that artistic inspiration and the knowledge of plants are revealed by *aziza*. The presence of these termite mounds in the forest shows *Dido's* strength. We recognize the shape of a miniature human being, a family, a penis ... Later, as he passed in front of a larger termite mound in his field, Dah Djagba designated it as a 'multi-storey villa' of the spirits. These little termite mounds are used to install *vodun*, some *legba* for example. The *legba*, which I have already mentioned, is generally represented by an earthen mound in which an erect penis is inserted. To install this *vodun*, you need these penis-shaped termite mounds which are deposited with other elements in a hole, under the mound: the force of the *vodun* is hidden, just as the spring must remain hidden. There is always a relationship between the visible and the hidden, as there is a relationship between inhabited space and the bush. These different contrasts are intertwined and determine a geography.

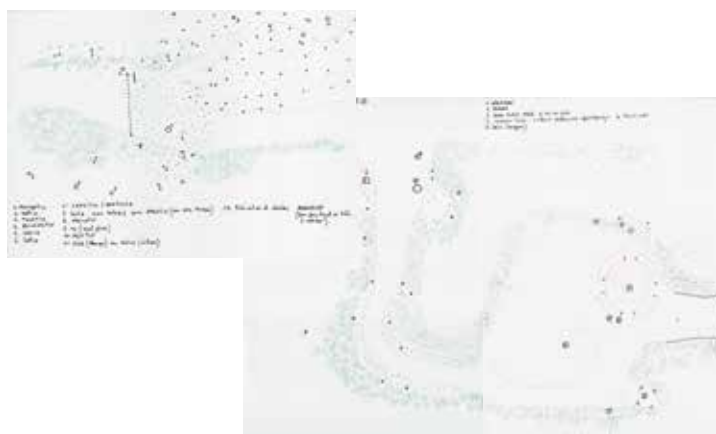
We cross a teak field and arrive in a second clearing, a particularly cool place which, during the rainy season, turns into a pool of water. It is a place where certain ceremonies are held for the *tchосу*, the one that consists in 'picking up the child from the river'. If someone gives birth to a *tchосу*, an anormal baby, when it dies, the family doesn't say that it is dead but that it has returned to the river. Because *tchосу*, as its name literally indicates, is the king of the river. You have to go look for it again and install it in a temple at home, like the one we have seen in Legonou's *honto*.

At what point do you talk about forests, or groves or something else? Did you ask yourself that question?



In the Fon language we speak of *zun*, which is commonly translated by ‘bush’. The same term can refer to a small grove or a large forest. Each bush is named after the *vodun* it protects: *Hlanzun*, *Didozun*, *Gedezun* ... The bigger the bush, the more this demonstrates the power that gives it life. *Dido*’s bush is vast and this raised the question of the drawing method and of its framing. The scientists I had met in Cotonou had carried out botanical inventories of forests which had sometimes taken them years, as the *Hlanzun*. For my part, I wanted to use drawings, but it seemed impossible to me to draw the whole forest. Attempting to make an exhaustive survey of it was unrealistic, but also problematic.

After our visits to the *zun*, I thought it made sense to go back to the different places where Dah Djagba had stopped, and to start from there. So I drew the layout of each of these stopping places, specifying the plants. I gradually realized that these parts of the forest were being maintained like houses – being swept, for instance – and I found myself using the same conventions as for the drawing of the courtyards: the marks of the sweeping, the foliage, the built elements, etc. The assembly of these different drawings gives an image of the forest, the one Dah Djagba showed me, while the bush remains a blurred space, indescribable through drawing.



Assemblage of the drawings made in *Dido*’s bush, following Dah Djagba’s narrative



View from the access to *Dido*’s bush, 14 Jan 2015

BACK TO THE COURTYARD



The field next to Constant's house, 9 Sep 2015.

We're back at Constant's house. When I used to get up and leave my room, I would see this bush beyond the fence wall and wonder who it belonged to. I once asked Constant if it was a sacred forest. He told me it was a field, owned by someone in the neighbourhood. A field? To me this was rather strange. I didn't understand and so I photographed this view regularly, to try to recognize something in it. Finally, one morning during a stay in 2017, when I was with my partner and daughter in the courtyard, I heard a knocking sound that came from there. Someone was felling trees. I went out to get closer and met a young man I had never met before in the neighbourhood: he was a 'child' from a neighbouring house that had not been maintained for years and that he had decided to take charge of in order to settle there and give it back its place in the neighbourhood.

Thanks to this meeting I learned that in the past many families had small fields next to the house. As I continued my research, I was able to characterize these different places that surround the family homes in the neighbourhood, which disappear year after year, in favour of new houses. More and more people want their own property. And it has become common for old family fields to be developed to build houses.

So you started with the courtyards, then you went to the forest, then you came back to the courtyards. Did it enlighten you on your initial question, as to how to understand the notion of landscape while avoiding its strictly Western definition?

In fact, this to and fro was present from the beginning, because I lived in a family and and I was circulating daily in and out, but my

work with drawing in the forests helped me to realize the importance of the complementarity of the houses with the forests. This landscape that I learned to recognize is not a backdrop, a scene in front of which houses are arranged and where social relationships take place, but rather it reflects a way of going beyond oneself, of gathering powers to face the changes that could affect the house or the country. The maintenance of the house and the forests, with ceremonies, sweeping, etc., but also the appropriation of new plants, are essential gestures to the existence and continuation of the house, and by extension of the country.

It's a way of life that integrates many of the elements introduced by colonization, like the exotic trees you've mentioned.

Yes, it is a principle of appropriation that is very dynamic but which, as I have already said, is inseparable from a certain precarity. If someone wants to build a new room in a house, no matter how many trees give sought-after fruits in the reserved area, what's important is to show your strength. The colonists were also said to have strengths, but they did not control everything. As one *vodun* priest once told me when talking about imported flowers, these are forces that whites don't know, they can't know the powers of plants.

For example, along some roads, around some schools and administrations, there are slender trees (*polyalthia longifolia*), native to India and Sri Lanka, which have spread rapidly in West Africa in recent years: from a distance they look like cypress trees. It is said that they bring good things to those who plant them around their land. There was one at Constant's when I arrived in 2015, but it was cut down because, as the



Road to the prefect's residence. The residence was built by the colonial administration in 1952 for the Commandant of the Cercle. Ahito, Abomey, 26 février 2016

vodunon later taught us, it's not good to plant this tree at home: if you talk about someone under this plant, it will bring tell the person.

Describing a landscape therefore requires learning to recognize its singular powers.

How do these relationships change perspectives on colonization and modernity?

The work in the houses led me to reconsider colonial and postcolonial urban and landscape planning. In the archives of the Institut Géographique National in Paris, I found a map of the city of Abomey that shows the roads created by the colonial authorities, the location of the market, the Catholic mission, the first hospital, the regional school, the state lands and, at the centre, the Palaces of the ancient kings. The large empty areas all around are referred to as 'bush'. The map must have been drawn up in the 1910s. In Abomey I learned that it was through roads that the colonists introduced a new organizational method into the country. They enabled the colonists to produce a new economy, to project a public space and to take possession of the land and the inhabitants. Violence here is not directly physical, but induced by the forms projected by the colonial powers on the Abomean country, whose particular powers were thus concealed. This was done, for example, by building roads that cut through houses, by homogenizing access to different parts of what was then called the city, by revealing some invisible parts and by isolating others, etc. This mode of violence did not disappear with independence: the operations to 'clear the public space' launched in December 2016 as part of the 'Talon Law' carried out by the Beninese Government is a recent example.⁸

What is interesting for my research is that there was also a landscaping project associated with this old plan (but not represented), because, as people told me, the colonists could not stand the sun and protected themselves by lining the roads with trees, mainly towards the administrative centres and the houses of the authorities. As we have seen with the slender trees and as we have seen in the courtyards, in the eyes of the Abomeans these developments also constitute forms of *protection*. For them, the colonists and their successors also protected themselves, in their own way, by arranging the place with plants. It is these recognizable forces that the Abomeans appropriate in the courtyards: it is not a coincidence that imported plants are aligned along the fences, on either side of the entrances, etc.: they are seeking the powers that characterize the rulers to protect themselves and cope with change.

This journey has led me to understand that colonial or modern modes of organization don't have to be opposed to traditional modes. It is a mode *on top* of all those that

already existed before: they are appropriated in particular situations, just like the *vodun* were also appropriated during the history of the Kingdom of Danxome, as are the families that compose it. But modern modes of organization possess a particular and redoubtable power: they are supported by and support an ideology that feeds itself. It produces an order in itself, a system which generates violence wherever it is reproduced. The appropriation of the colonial and modern powers in the Abomean courtyards, not as powers *in themselves* but *for themselves*,⁹ i.e. as they are integrated into the particular histories of the houses, is very instructive.

8

The municipalities concerned are Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Parakou, Abomey-Calavi, Ouidah, Bohicon, Abomey, Sèmè-Kpodji.

9

I took this expression from Camerounese philosopher Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga. See *La crise de Muntu: authenticité africaine et philosophie* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1977), pp. 218–230.



Store along the Abomey-Bohicon road, 26 May 2018

This is one of the many stores that have multiplied in the shade of the trees along the roads since the eviction operations in 2016 that were just mentioned. You find a range of objects in these shops, hanging from branches or displayed along the road: plastic flowers, doormats, posters, bed sheets, caps, uniforms, etc. As we've seen, it is through the communication routes that exterior forces – in short, change – enter the country. It is also through roads that during the colonial period, an individual property regime was established, bringing in its wake a form of anonymous and dispossessive threat in family homes, that people designated as witchcraft or occult forces. The display of doormats in the photo, exposed to the gaze of all those who pass along the road, seems to express both this aspiration to individual ownership and an attraction to external powers which may be appropriated in the houses, not to express a landscape in itself, self-sufficient, but for oneself, thus actualizing a particular historical trajectory and preventing unforeseen events.



Kpatin of the Agossou-Legonou's house. *Lego* neighborhood, Abomey, 26 Sep 2017

Accattone explores minor practices in art and architecture through the specific means of the printed magazine. As an exhibition on paper, each issue is a montage of contributions whose shared positions towards reality, history and representation resonate with one another.

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